

Dirty Data

‘Artists find the measure of their own time just by doing their work’, says Julia Scher who began making art about surveillance long before the Internet really existed.


By Jakob S. Boeskov 14.06.19 Interview Artikel på dansk



Julia Scher, Security by Julia IX (SBJ IX), 1991. Exhibition view, Le Consortium, Dijon, 1991. Courtesy the artist and Esther Schipper, Berlin Photo © Julia Scher.

“It was literature and the idea of a dystopian future that brought me to a landscape that was in ruins and under control,” says Julia Scher, who has been working with surveillance as a theme since her first show at NADA in New York in 1986. This American artist’s pioneering work includes massive and complex art installations, where surveillance cameras, wire mesh fences, video monitors, and surreal signage invite viewers into a delirious world of surveillance and seduction.

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For her show, *Predictive Engineering* at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1993, Scher created an installation where museum visitors saw footage of themselves mixed with footage of naked people and scenes of actors chasing one another, creating a hyperreal feedback loop in which the fictional and the real were edited-together in real time. This piece is emblematic of Scher's work, which not only investigates the abstract gaze of surveillance, but also how surveillance changes both the watchers and the watched.

What's more, she was there before anybody else. Nowadays, most are aware of the "surveillance capitalism" embodied by the Internet, but when Scher started her career, the internet as we know it had yet to be invented, and electronic surveillance was a marginal theme. This not only makes her a trailblazer, but also an artist who has moved beyond the political and into the prophetic and poetic.

In 2010, I saw Scher give a lecture during a seminar on urbanism and surveillance at Hochschule für bildende Künste Hamburg (Hamburg Art Academy), where we were both speaking. She was extremely charming and engaging, showing images from one of her signature pieces, *Security By Julia* (1988–) in which women in pink uniforms act as security guards. She also cracked a lot of jokes. Perhaps her showmanship on stage is related to the attractions of her work. Like all great art, Scher's work contains elements of danger, eroticism, and comedy, and its seriousness is wrapped in delightful paradoxes and mysteries. Her work is, in other words, multilayered and ecstatic.

Today, Scher lives in Cologne, Germany, where she teaches at Kunsthochschule für Medien (The Academy of Media Arts). The interview was conducted over Skype as a video call; Scher sat in her office at the academy, while I sat in my loft in New York City's Chinatown. Here, among other things, Scher discusses her childhood in California, Francis Ford Coppola's film *The Conversation* (1974), and why artists will always be interested in what it means to be human.

Julia Scher: Can you see me?

Jakob S. Boeskov: I can see you. Can you see me?

JS: Yes, I can see you.

JB: Cool. I just downloaded a little program called Audio Hijack. We are only recording the audio, just so you know...

JS: Okay.

JB: So, what's going down?

JS: This Thursday, we are having one of our crypto-parties. It just means that cryptologists, local hackers, people from the Chaos Computer Club get together and help people with their own computers, how to encrypt email and so on.

JB: In a sense, you're helping teach the students to be hackers, or what?

JS: Well, it's at MIT, where you teach people that...

JB: Have you ever taught MIT students? I guess my question is: do you prefer to work with artists or scientists?

JS: Well, I don't prefer either. It's a people thing.

JB: John Waters had this real good quote about hackers where he said that the only really subversive subculture today is hackers, but they are all dressed so badly, they don't look cool.

JS: Aah!

JB: Could you agree with that?

JS: Where is he? Maybe it's just in New York. You know, there's the white hats, there's the black hats...

JB: I know.

JS: ... there's the grey hats. I mean, you've got different colours of hats.

JB: There's a lot of different colours of hats. I think they could dress a little better, some of these hackers, but I want to speak a little bit...

[Editors note: For those blissfully unfamiliar with the fascinating details of computer hacking, we can explain that these 'hats' that Julia and Jakob are talking about is a reference to three different kinds of computer hackers. Black Hat Hackers are criminal hackers, who do it for the money. Grey Hat Hackers are half-illegal hackers, which means they are not afraid to break the law, but they don't do it for the money. Edward Snowden is a Grey Hat Hacker. And White Hat Hackers are corporate hackers who are payed by their employers to hack into computer systems, in order to test them.]



Julia Scher, *Occupational Placement (1)*, 1989/1990. Vintage silver gelatin print, 27,8 x 35 cm. Courtesy the artist and Esther Schipper, Berlin. Photo © Andrea Rossetti.

JS: How do the hackers in New York dress like?

JB: Well, you don't see them because they are in front of their computers all the time. I wouldn't know. But I am very curious about how Hollywood portrays computer hackers, because every time there's a Hollywood movie, they always make computer hackers look cooler than they are. There was a movie called War Games in the 80s, and the hackers looked so cool. But in reality when you meet the real hackers, these guys – or girls, but mostly they are guys – these guys have more pimples than in the movies and they are socially awkward people.

JS: But that's like saying there's only one type of person who rides the subway. I mean, Edward Snowden when he was first working with Laura Poitras, he looked great. He wore a white tee shirt one day and a black tee shirt, then he had that grey shirt...

JB: You think that he had a good sense of style?

JS: I don't know if you can generalise about hackers. I had a friend who was a cryptologist, he sadly died in 2013. He wore Hawaiian shirts, had long hair, and was a surfer in Venice beach. When he died, there was a Hawaiian-style memorial for him with the giant surfboards. I don't know if you can....

JB: No, no, I know. Let's skip the fashion talk. I want to talk about your work. It seems like your work is a little bit ahead of the curve, so to speak. Everybody is talking about surveillance these days. But you worked with surveillance, basically, before the Internet really existed. So, maybe I should ask you a really general question: how did surveillance come to you as a theme?

JS: Let's see. It was a long time ago, and....

JB: Yes! You were ahead of the curve. You were one of the first artists to work with surveillance, I suppose.

JS: There are many stories about how artists find the measure of their own time just by doing their work.

JB: Sure.

JS: I was painting. I was actually painting pictures of people trapped in monitors without really knowing it was cameras and monitors. On 3 March 1985, late at night, in a really cold studio in Minnesota, we were sitting around drinking vodka. It was, like, twenty-five below. In kind of drunken discussion, I said, 'I'm just going to use the real gear. I'm just going to use real cameras and monitors'.

JB: Randomness is often overlooked in art. It's like the story of Picasso and Braque inventing Cubism around the same time... sometimes the thing is to open your mind to what is happening around you.

JS: Yes. I got my Masters in 1984. George Orwell's book *1984* was an inspiration for my graduation.

JB: Aha! There you go!

JS: It was actually literature and the idea of a dystopian future that brought me to a landscape that was in ruins and under control, where people were trapped. It was a notion shared by everyone from Philip K. Dick, whom you are quoting in your pre-crime project, to the anti-capitalist movement at the time, to Noam Chomsky, Herbert Schiller, and other people who found a dystopian world ahead. It was more velvet glove than iron fist. I began reading people who had been revealing secrets, and had brokered things to magazines like *The Fox*, and other publications at the time, like "Dissent" magazine, where I read Gary T. Marx and his "Maximum Security Society" piece for the first time.

JB: Yes.

JS: So, it was through literature, periodicals, and magazines, and also through big screen film extravaganzas that it came together. There was also the madness of television, television, television...



Julia Scher, *Always There – Surveillance Bed III*, 2000. Bedstead, steel, wood, foam, 4 monitors, 4 cameras, 1 infrared-camera, 2 computer video switchers, 2 video players, 1 video recorder, 1 microphone, 1 amplifier, 2 speakers, 1 ARRI light (with red filter), cable. Exhibition view, *Julia Scher. Always There – Surveillance Bed*, Schipper & Krome, Berlin, 2000. Courtesy the artist and Esther Schipper, Berlin. Photo © Ilona Ripke.

JB: CNN was in its early stages in the States at this time, I suppose.

JS: Well, MTV had started in 1983. People who were making Video Hour were asked to make these spaces between the regular run times. This idea of durational aesthetics that I developed through closed-circuit television really came by watching my friends doing television, television, television in this endlessness. But it wasn't any more important than watching people like Vito Acconci going 'Na na, na na, na na, na', for hours and hours and hours. There were already artists out there who were stocking the train of following and watching and undoing privacy, but not really naming it. Now they name it.

JB: A lot of political art – I guess now art about technology and surveillance will be considered political art – can be a little boring. There's a poetic and humorous side to your work that I find tremendously powerful. I want to talk a little bit about your manifestos that are all very political. Reading them reminds of the sensation I had when I was a teenager in Copenhagen going to see Public Enemy. Your manifestos are very powerful text pieces and they're very political. Also, there are sexual undertones in a very poetic way. Maybe I should ask you: have you ever been interested in poetry? Did you ever write poetry?

JS: I say too much. Well, people like John Berryman and Theodore Roethke, who were connected to Abstract Expressionist painters, really inspired me. But what brought me to the manifestos was the humour in advertising for high-tech shit in the 1980s, that blew me away. Then I saw artists like Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, who were able to take command, who were able to grab these handy sloganeers and turn them into something different, something new. These were the women who were very inspiring to me. On the man-side, on the advertising side...

JB: On the man-side?

JS: Well, living in Minneapolis, it was the headquarters of Pillsbury, where they tried to sell you bread products, this bread crap. Just the absurdity of the advertising.

JB: But back then there were no advertisements about software products. It's a fairly new thing. I remember a couple of years ago there were advertisements on the billboards of New York for a stupid piece of software called Foursquare, and their slogan was, 'tell us what you like, and we will lead you to places that you will love'. Or something like that. Today, software is just everywhere; it is now being advertised at the retail level. But that wasn't the case when you were doing these manifestos.

JS: No.

JB: And when you were doing work concerning monitors and surveillance, this was a couple of years before the Internet. Correct?

JS: Yeah. The 80s were before the BBS [Editor's note: Bulletin Board System, an early text-based version of the Internet]. It was at a time where closed-circuit television was seen infrequently – for example, in James Bond films, spy thrillers, and science fiction. What you're describing about these software ads we have today is this: they are selling us something that we used to be able to do for free, like touch each other, like talk to each other. Now, of course, mediated experience has a price tag on it.



Julia Scher, Guards, 2004. Performance. Exhibition view: Julia Scher, Guards, Live at Frieze London, 2018. Courtesy the artist and Esther Schipper, Berlin. Photo: ©Andrea Rossetti.

JB: Just to return to that era when closed circuit television was new, I was born in 1973 and I read George Orwell when I was a child. I remember, I found it a little old-fashioned. The surveillance state did become a reality, but it became a reality in a radically different way than Orwell imagined. We didn't get a Big Brother. They don't control us with pain, they control us with pleasure.

JS: If you ask any Pisces, we Pisces go in circles, but the future ends up being in that circle. I'm a Pisces. Dan Graham is an Aries and...

JB: I'm an Aries too!

JS: What are you?

JB: Aries. I'm an Aries.

JS: See, there you go. Aries gets Pisces and then laughs about us, because we see the future more than Aries. But Aries likes us because they can go really far with it. We don't know what the future will hold, but I believe that every young artist, anybody who says they want to be an artist, has glimpses of what's ahead.

JB: Absolutely.

JS: Every time I talk to young artists, you know, five years later, what they talk about has come true. It's really a wonderful way to express your internal sense of your compass.

JB: In that sense, you were really early to see this new world. I'm curious if you ever felt you were too early, if people got what you were talking about? When I look at your work, I feel like, 'oh my God'. Speaking about this in the 1990s, a lot of people must have said, 'this is just paranoid conspiracy theory stuff!' Was this ever a problem for you?

JS: Yes. In 1985, when I was speaking about surveillance, I would give a talk and I'd say, 'are there any questions?' and invariably there would be silence. Then, a hand would go up and somebody would say, 'well, what do you mean by surveillance?'

JB: Yeah [laughs]. Well, this still happens. Topical Cream Magazine hosted a seminar about science fiction and art with Dora Budor, Sam Pulitzer, and me. After the talk, a woman came over to me and asked, 'do you work for the government?' [laughs] So you still get questions from people who don't quite get it.

JS: Do you think people care, though, if you work for the government or not? As an artist, you have to ask yourself: what issues are relevant today? Because, what is a government today? And what is nationalism today?

JB: Sure, in the age of cyberspace, in the age of international networks, the nation state seems more and more like a thing of the past. You can argue that Obama was the first Internet president – in the sense that he was the first guy to really use the Internet to get elected – and Trump is the first Twitter president. Technology also decides who becomes our leaders, in a sense.

JS: Technology also allows for a place within the media, such that I, right now, can be chatting with you on Skype and at the same time see an image of this guy who got a penis transplant the other day at Mass General Hospital. I can see this on the same screen?

JB: What does he look like? Does he look happy with his new penis or what?

JS: He looks happy with his new penis.

JB: That's wonderful. Technology can be wonderful, I suppose.

JS: The technocracy, I think, that you are pointing to, this idea that we get swallowed up maybe, or taken over, is no more poignant than in the discussion of robots today. I'm just raising the topic of robots because it points to outer space and another intelligence that we don't know yet.

JB: Absolutely. But since you mentioned the penis transplant, I want to go back a little bit again to the manifestos and the sexual undertones that are in them – and in a lot of your other work too. I'm just curious, and I don't want this to be a sleazy... or, maybe we should turn this into a sleazy conversation!? The connection between sexuality and technology has been investigated since the early Surrealists, but when you started to work with these themes, the Internet was fairly new. Internet pornography wasn't very common in the very early stages of the Internet. So, my question is this: was it always obvious for you, to see this connection between sex and new technology?

JS: Well, just to restate your thing about when did Internet meet porn: in 1995, I was actually approached by a guy who was repairing art gallery computers. He approached me to be a producer – because I was working in HTML-1 and, whatever, because I was an artist dealing with sex – if I would be a producer for Penthouse on the Internet, for Internet porn.

JB: Oh, Jesus!

JS: I said no, but of course I'd be a millionaire now and we wouldn't be talking.

JB: Julia, Penthouse is not doing so well these days.

JS: I grew up Van Nuys, California, which was the porn capital of the world. The sex was right there. When you talk about control and access and manipulation, you're right there with people who want to make money off it. Then, some of the great people who did something called... was it mosaic or ceramic? These cyber goddesses – who were really connected and became some of the first women on the Internet dealing with sensuality – they were very sensually aware, and they knew everything. They knew Queen Wu, they knew all the people from Mondo 2000. [Editor's note: Mondo 2000 was an influential cyberculture magazine published in California in the 1980s and 1990s whose editor-in-chief was Alison Bailey Kennedy a.k.a. Queen Wu.]

These women were really very intelligent in terms of what sensuality would become in a techno-driven world. It was there, at that moment, where women were on top of their game in talking about it in magazines and dealing with it. It was right on the cusp. It was a really interesting time that way, as well. My manifestos fit into that program because it predicted the occurrence of this... not clash, but this agency of combination that separate fields were now coming together. But it wasn't strange to them at all, and so I was in some of these magazines. Year after year, there was a growing base of people who were into the issues. There's Peter Fend, there is...

JB: He used to live here! Do you know that Peter Fend use to live here at this loft?

JS: Oh, wow! Where is he now?

JB: He's in New York. I see him from time to time, but he used to live in this very room, in this loft. He was the first artist I ever met from New York. This was in Copenhagen. I was twenty-two years old, and Peter was riffing these hilarious one-liners. I felt like he was either insane or a visionary.

JS: He's a visionary. I haven't seen him in years though, so I've lost track.

JB: My first solo show, where I showed the ID Sniper (2002) was in New York in 2004, at The Thing. Gisela, Wolfgang Staehle's wife, told me how Peter Fend had problems with Homeland Security, because Peter was the first artist, the first civilian, to get access to satellite imagery of Earth, and this became a problem. So, Gisela told me how agents from Homeland Security had come to the offices of The Thing to ask for Peter Fend. She showed me a business card that one of the Homeland Security agents had given her. Again, the way surveillance works is very different from how George Orwell imagined it.

JS: Regarding Orwell, I want to clarify how things opened up for me. Gary T. Marx taught at MIT in 1988, and I taught in his class, which was in the department of sociology. He taught this idea that the maximum security society had six sub-societies. I introduced my work, and the six sub-categories of his maximum security society are six categories that I've covered in my work.

JB: Could you break down each of those six? I think it would be really interesting for the interview. What are those six?

JS: Actuarial, predictive, transparent, and porous. And by that I mean, the porous society is what you could go through, but there are massive checks. Like the airport before the TSA emerged. The dossier society. He never knew about cell phones, but you could have your dossier on your Internet. Your data profile is who you are. For example, we couldn't see that then.

JB: Got it, yeah.



Julia Scher, *Information America*, 1995. Overall dimensions variable (desk: 73.7 x 152.4 x 76.2 cm). Installation view: Julia Scher, *American Promises*, Ortuzar Projects, New York, 2019. Photo: Timothy Doyon, Courtesy of Ortuzar Projects.

JS: They say the next thing is the aggregate society. Aggregate engineering has surpassed prediction as a way forward with security. You can find it online on his website. At the end of his career, he turned to humour and started writing cultural rags, writing stories about spies and stuff. He totally went the other direction. His background had been writing about police surveillance of Civil Rights marches and how the left was being destroyed by police and the CIA.

JB: In a way, there's nothing to laugh about today. At least in the 1960s, the whistleblowers who broke the story about Watergate became national heroes. In our generation, similar whistleblowers are in jail or in exile. It's a very serious time we live in. But again, back to the element of humour. Humour can be necessary in the sense that... well, if you deal with surveillance and paranoia, working with these subjects can also become a little bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Working with paranoia and surveillance can be a comfortable paranoid world that you can engulf yourself in. You don't strike me as a very paranoid person, Julia. You are a respected and a loved artist. But, I guess, my question is: does working with surveillance have a personal effect on you? That question is a little vague, pardon me.

JS: Tony Oursler, who I have known for many years, and I have talked about humour and comedy many times. He said, 'comedy is tragedy plus time'. My background drags me in to deal with tragedy. But the existing stature of living with this insanity, this world, deserves some humour.

JB: Absolutely.

JS: I find things that we do, what people do, really funny. I came out of the post-war 50s television where Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz – all these really funny TV shows – handled themes like domestic abuse, people beating each other up, treating women like shit, pedophilia, all this crap. In a way, I took on the demeanour of some of these 50s comedies, these women who laughed it off as a way to deal, and then it also satisfied an audience. I got into comedy, humour, as much as a self-defense mechanism. Because I'm shy, but also because it invoked that you were going to overcome something. Can you hear me?

JB: Absolutely. I'm still here.

JS: It's not funny when you can't detect someone who's watching you and stealing your information. It's not funny when satellite photography catches you doing something you don't want other people to see. It's not funny, but humour is a survival mechanism.

JB: Humour is also a way to create truth. Stanley Kubrick initially wanted to make Dr. Strangelove as a thriller, and then he realised that mutual nuclear destruction was so absurd that he ended up making it into comedy. But that didn't make it any less an important movie. I think there is a misconception about humour in art. For some reason, people seem to prefer irony, where satire can be a little misperceived for some reason. I love satire, and I believe our time needs movies or art like Dr. Strangelove to show the absurdity of it all.

JS: Yes.

JB: Again, I love Laura Poitras, and Citizen4 is a fantastic movie. This is not a put down of Laura Poitras, but when you make a very serious work, there can be an element of preaching to the converted. Outside academia, outside the art system, most people don't accept the concept of the new surveillance society yet. This will change, surely. I grew up in the 80s, and I really saw how movies and mass culture can change the general perception in society. Those movies about the Vietnam War, Apocalypse Now and so on, they really changed our perception of history; they changed our perception of that era completely. Eventually, perhaps, there will be big blockbuster movies that will make people realise what dark times we have been living in for the last ten years. It seems like people haven't really grasped it yet...

JS: The humorists might say, 'Oh, these were the good old days'. In ten years, we're all going to be living like dogs and eating cockroaches, with no houses and we'll be naked. Who knows? The great film, *The Conversation*, which was basically Coppola's love poem to surveillance was made really just to cover his costs for *The Godfather*, I think.

JB: I love The Conversation!

JS: There's such beauty in the Harry Caul character and how he was named. The idea of the caul and the covering: this thin coat that is like the skin when a baby is born with a caul. The use of language and the words and the script, it's such a beautiful film.

JB: He's such a sad and lonely character, Harry Caul. He saw that loneliness that comes with being a voyeur. That loneliness is around today. I think a lot of people struggle with a sense of inauthenticity because capitalism forces them to be voyeurs, so to speak.

JS: That's such a great point. It's maybe not the discussion for today. Tom Levine wrote a great article that describes the last scene of *The Conversation*. It's the reason that [Caul] can never find the hidden camera after he's torn up his apartment and destroyed everything he owns. The camera is not to be found, it's not in the room.

JB: It's in his mind.

JS: It's not even in the building. It's outside. The camera is the viewer, the audience that is watching. When I saw *The Conversation* in 1974, I had this wonderful, important break. For me, this was so inspiring – I'm much older than you. In '74, I had already seen a lot of Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman, and this really is a heartbreaking moment in the film: that you cannot reach it, that there is a gap. There is a space there that Coppola was able to portray, the beauty of that. It's one of my top ten surveillance films of all time. The audio is so amazing, and the women are so disingenuous... but just a caveat, back to humour, is that when I started Safe and Secure Productions as a real job, it was an outgrowth of my cleaning business in Minneapolis. I was cleaning peoples' apartments and I worked at an aerobics parlour cleaning the mats.

JB: Did you do a good job?

JS: I was rejected from... I wanted to go to electronics school to learn to solder and shit, and I failed the entrance exam. Brown Electronics.

JB: Fuck them.

JS: I hand taught. I'd go the store and ask: how do you plug; what does this wire do? I learned that way. And then I started Safe and Secure Productions as a company that installed surveillance for real – and security bar gratings, door locks, and cameras, for real.

JB: You actually did that? I didn't know that. So let me get this straight, Julia, you installed security cameras for women who were afraid of crime, burglary, and sexual crimes?

JS: Oh, I had a real business. S.S.P. : Safe and Secure Productions. I shouldn't have lost the website, but it cost me too much money. The company was installing security equipment. I had started with women who had trouble feeling secure. So, I'd do a whole security appraisal of their house or their apartment and install it. I brought everything over, burglar bar gratings, new locks, cameras, wire, and would fix up their place. So, it went from cleaning to installing. By the time I had my first show at NADA in 1986 in New York, I told them I'd be going back to Minneapolis in four months if I fucked up in New York. I still had customers in Minneapolis for years who thought I was still coming back to fix their cameras and clean their house.

JB: I love that. I didn't know you installed cameras for real.

JS: I did. So, well, it was somewhat sad. But it was done with humour, in a way. It was playful work, but with an attention to how catastrophic, devilish, and powerful the forces running over us were. I had a business license, and I was also the first woman member of the Metropolitan Burglar and Fire Alarm Association as a Class 1 certified installer in New York in 1988.

JB: There you go. Maybe we should also think about wrapping this up. I think we covered a lot of ground. Maybe we should end up on a positive note, because we touched upon the cockroaches and the coming apocalypse and how our heroes are jailed. So, I guess what I'm hearing you also say is that some technology can also have a positive side. You actually helped these women, made them feel more safe. I'm not trying to water down any criticism – or water down your work, or my own work, or the work of anybody else – but you know what I'm saying? I guess I'm trying to say there are sort of positive ways of looking at how technology can be used as a counter-measure. You have a wonderful phrase, 'Counterspy Transmission', in one of your manifestos.

JS: Counterspy, it's an interrupter. I think the last word of that line is an interrupter, 'Counterspy Transmission Interrupters'.

JB: OK, I only got part of it.

JS: In any sense, I did have a friend who worked for the NSA and who was a very wonderful cryptologist. It's not for this conversation. But, anyway, we ought to consider that: do we as people want to keep democratic principles? If surveillance is one-way, all the time, we're screwed. The democratic principles, such as we understood them in the past, could fall in the whereabouts of control, when they're unknown and invisible. So, does spying and surveillance put the principles that we believe in at risk? This isn't a report on the state of the United States, but I think it gives a hint as to the kinds of emerging threats that are real, and that are dealt with by artists who see what emerges on the horizon. I know they're talking a lot about horizon now, because of Verizon, the telephone company, and there are all these jokes. I think they're funny. I can't remember any of them, but they're pretty funny. It's a telephone company.

JB: No, I know. I remember the Verizon strike a few years ago. The workers at Verizon were striking and it was affecting peoples' download speed. It was very futuristic.

JS: Oh.

JB: There's a universality, there's a timelessness to surveillance, in the sense that, well, even if you look to biology, the animals look at each other. Information is power. In a sense, it's always been like this. I'm really interested in camouflage in nature. Already now, people are working with counterspying measures. There are some designers, in order to avoid face recognition, they print out tee shirts with famous people on them, so the camera will look at the famous person and get distracted that way. But nature has been evolving like this for hundreds of thousands of years. You have un-poisonous snakes that look exactly like poisonous snakes in order to avoid being eaten by predators. Ideas about camouflage, deception, and secrecy are part of evolution. And now, everything is just getting magnified by technology and it is what it is. Anyway, I just want to say thank you for talking with me. I want to say it's such wonderful and important work you're doing. I think you have inspired more people than you know. Again, the visionary quality of it being so early on in the game is good karma, and it gives you street cred. You're original... in hip-hop, they call it 'original gangster'. It's the person who was there before everybody else.

JS: You're too nice, and your conversations with me over email have been beautiful, exciting, and lifesaving – and just so inspiring.

JB: Oh, thank you.

JS: Can I order your Face Jagger book from your website?

JB: I'll send it you. That project took a lot of time, but now it's finished as a book. For this piece, I went to Anaheim in California, to a real surveillance fair to present a cyber weapon. It was a weapon that could hack the identities of terrorists by simulating their faces – again, going back to mimicry, simulation, and camouflage.

JS: Great idea.

JB: The weapon was taken seriously. I spoke to people who were selling biometric locks. They didn't call them locks. They called them 'biometric access control systems'. But they were, in fact, electronic locks, where you can only get access to your building if your face and your eyes and your fingers are scanned. I told the guy from the company about Face Jagger and I asked him, 'could anybody gain access through your biometric lock system with a 3D printed mask on?' And he just answered really cool, and calm and collected: 'no, no. Look at this part of the lock. This is an infrared camera, the infrared camera will detect heat. This means that anybody wearing a mask will look suspicious because there's no heat coming through the mask'.

JS: You just have to keep expanding on the technology, because there's a new kind of face cream at MIT that can mask who you are, and deliver temperature...

JB: I want that face cream.

JS: You should check it out. At MIT they have worked on it so that you could actually augment it. Computer-to-computer matching systems are only as smart as the computers. So, you can find other techno-materials to go with this mask.

JB: Absolutely. And that's funny you say that. I don't know why I want to keep ending this on a positive note, but I guess dystopia is a little boring in the long run. People tend to think of this new totalitarian techno-machine that will arise, and it's true. We are living in a totalitarian capitalist system, we are living in a surveillance state, but there are always counter measures. A few years back, in Hollywood, a lot of people were talking about this stupid thing called the Singularity. You know, the concept that Ray Kurzweil coined? I find it to be a ridiculous concept, and a very fascist concept, in a way. Like what you said a second ago, there are limits to what computers can do. They can never have a soul, they're still only machines.

JS: They're making them with souls now. They're working on it.

JB: Oh, yeah? But will they succeed? I don't think so.

JS: I bet you there could be a time where the computers, artificial intelligence, gets rid of us, because we're so full of failure and so unnecessary. We don't know how this scenario will play out. There are many potential possibilities with what humans will be in the future. Maybe your DNA will get implanted in an AI device one day?

JB: No, no, no.

JS: What is humanity? Artists always want to fuck with that, want to play with that. What is humanity? What is a human gesture? What is inhuman? Is waterboarding inhuman, even if it gives you the name of some creepy guy that you think might be harming you? This is all a matter of perspective.

JB: I know what you're saying. We are already cyborgs in the sense that you have glasses, I have glasses; technology has augmented our bodies in a very basic way. Right now, we're using a computer to have this conversation. But, I must say, I do think that Singularity subscribers misunderstand something fundamental if they think computers will have a soul. There seems to be a misconception that accumulation of data equals consciousness. They keep building these huge data centres, but they just accumulate data. Even people in NSA and people inside CIA say this is counterproductive because we're going to have data overload. In the same sense, I think what the Singularity subscribers say is that if you accumulate enough data, you will have the simulation of human consciousness, and I think that's a falsity.

JS: We better damn well know what we are as humans, and whether our principles about liberty – or even if it's privacy, or what is a family – can endure in a world where maybe the soul is only in a few of the living, and not all of the living, beings. I really don't have an answer. I guarantee you in twenty years from now, I would have a very different perspective. In the same way, in 1985, I never could've imagined having such a conversation with you. This is a total time travel.

JB: Absolutely.

JS: Because I can't imagine somebody else would be so engaged with these words and saving them to memory. And you're not shrinking from the vocabulary, or afraid of the glossary at the back of Brave New World, like so many people were then. It's wonderful and fascinating, and it's a great time. And it's great to travel over time with you.

JB: It's been great to time travel with you too, Julia. I think it was a very human conversation, and a great post-human conversation. I'm looking forward to traveling to the post-human world with you. I want to say thank you for taking the time out to do this. Do you feel okay with this? Do you think we covered enough?

JS: My big question for you would be about how you feel, in your circulation of information and images, and how you work as a transporter yourself. Maybe there's an equivalent in a parallel universe, and what would that person, vehicle, or essence be?

JB: What do you mean?

JS: Well, like, you're making a gun to do a face transplant, in a way. Maybe in another universe, it would be a flower or something else. You have flowers in the background.

JB: For me, a lot of this work is Scandinavian trauma therapy. People don't really realise this. People are going, 'oh, you're just some techno fetishist trip', and I have to explain to them, 'no, I grew up in Scandinavia, where Philip K. Dick's concept of pre-crime was very much a reality'. When I grew up, there was a thing called, interestingly enough, S.S.P.

JS: Oh, wow.

JB: S.S.P. was an acronym for Schools, Social Services, and Police. All these units would collaborate in order to prevent crimes before they happened. This was Scandinavia in the 1980s. Scandinavia is a very soft surveillance society; it's real, but very soft. Some of this stuff comes from me dealing with that. Generally, I just find it fascinating to work with the future, because it's the only thing we don't know anything about.

JS: I have to tell you, many of my students from the former GDR (German Democratic Republic) have a very different perspective on surveillance, and a very serious alertness, like you do. They would never laugh about these issues. You'll get more of a laugh in a country that never had to deal with it, where kids weren't exposed to it.

JB: Perhaps we should wrap this up. I think we covered a lot of ground.

JS: I'd say there is not enough time to cover all the questions and jewels of information you have, which I haven't even asked you about. Maybe one day, I'll get to New York and we can continue the conversation.

JB: I can't wait.



Julia Scher taking Liberty from China Town to Tribeca, 2019. Photo: ©Julia Scher.